THE MOVIE

65

60p

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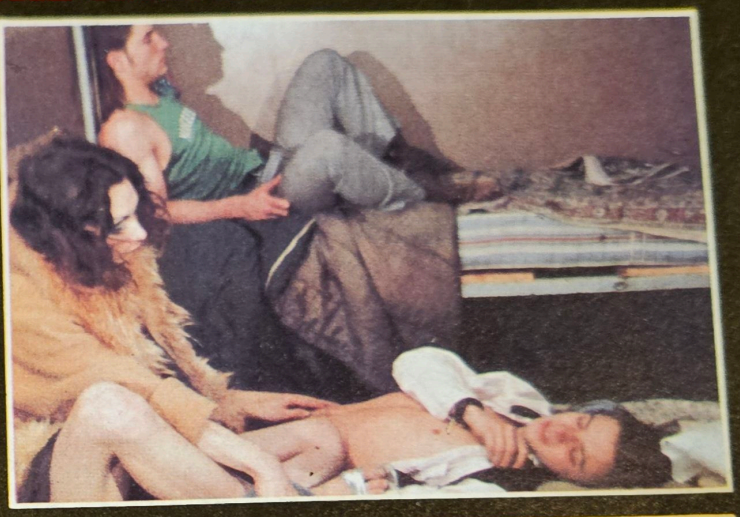
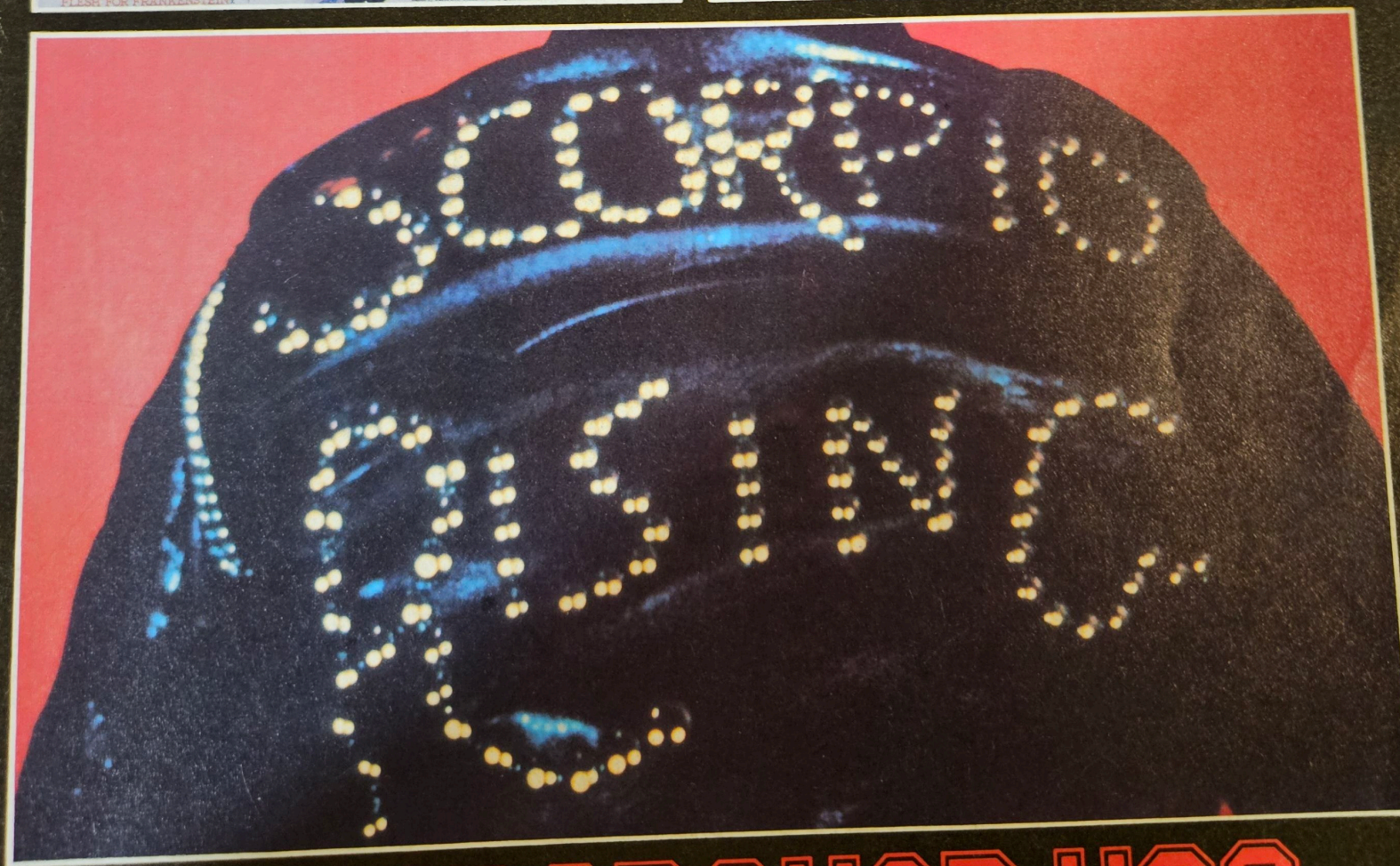
THE ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF THE CINEMA





UNDERGROUND USA

Chapter 65

20p

Underground USA

The Underground film-makers of New York and elsewhere formed a resistance movement against the domination of Hollywood, and yet Hollywood film images continued to fascinate them

'Underground film' was a term the press coined to describe the independent film activity that reached its peak in the Sixties in the United States and particularly in New York. Until the end of the Sixties, most states and cities had direct censorship of all films that were publicly exhibited, and often charged film-makers heavily for viewing and judging their work. This system was not changed until all film censorship was declared unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court in the late Sixties.

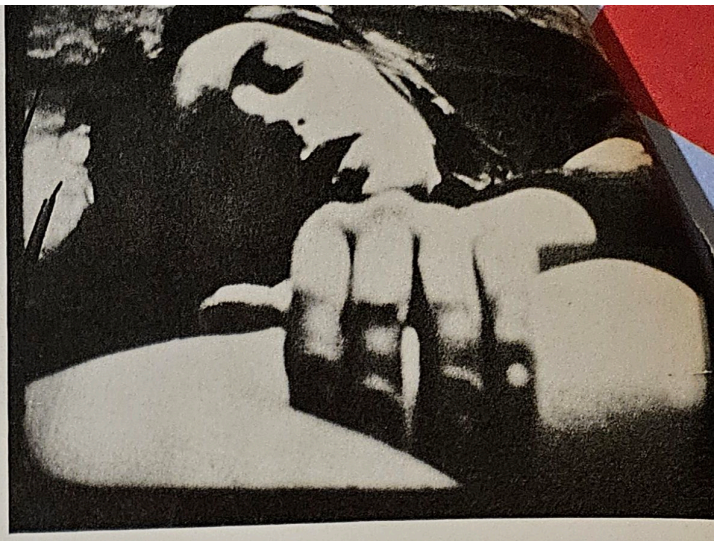
The Underground movement was not united by one type of film-making but by the necessity for film-makers to stand collectively against the harassment of police raids and the mockery of the press. This togetherness provided the very essential social relationships which made up an audience, as well as the physical exchange of film-making equipment and even actors – many film-makers acted in each other's films. Most of them came to film from other art disciplines; the essential motivating force was self-expression and the use of film was another, and new, medium in which to express and explore individual concerns. In this they followed the example of the Dadaists and Surrealists, some of them also film-makers, who shocked the established European art world of the Twenties.

The new forms, images and content appeared as a sort of rebellion that was confronted by the usual reaction against the new, as well as the more political confrontation with the censorship that made it 'illegal' to have public showings of uncensored films or to charge admission. Working on and showing films had to function much as the 'underground' resistance did during the war – signs and markings on lamp posts, word of mouth in the new film-making community and empty warehouses as cinemas. An additional factor was that after the war years, film material and equipment became cheaper and accessible to more people, so it was suddenly easier for an artist to acquire a camera and make films.

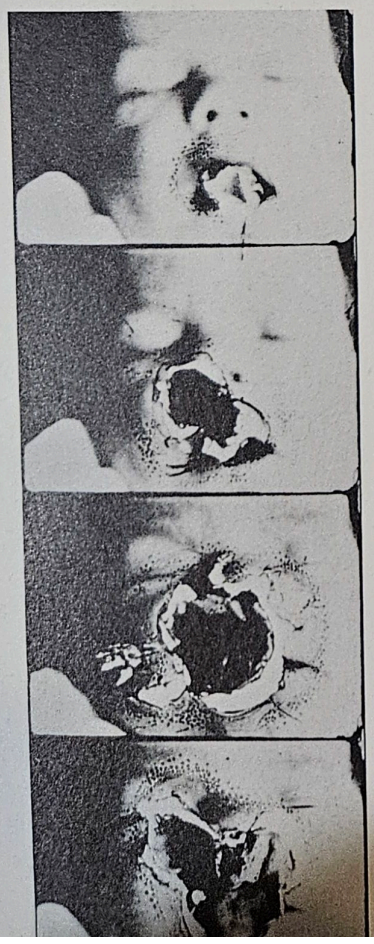
Prior to the many Underground films of the Sixties, there were individual attempts to free cinema expression, notably by Maya Deren, a dancer, whose first film, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), attempted to express her own personal sense of duality, sometimes by showing two images of her simultaneously on the screen. Deren also began to lecture and write about the personal or individual film. She hired a small theatre, the Provincetown Playhouse in downtown New York City, to show her films and with the money received from the screenings helped other independent film-makers, including Stan Brakhage and Kenneth Anger.

In 1957 the Californian film-maker Robert Pike decided to distribute his own films, since no other distributor would handle them. He also distributed the films of other West Coast film-makers, including the Whitney brothers' 'motion graphics', Jordan Belson's new animation, Bruce Conner's film collages made from 'found footage' and Curtis

Above left: Maya Deren was influenced by Surrealism in her Meshes of the Afternoon, *but her own image in the film is at times almost Pre-Raphaelite. Above: Jack Smith's* Flaming Creatures *featured an orgy involving transvestite men and a few women; the shots of limp penises inflamed the wrath of the New York police. Below: Kenneth Anger's* Scorpio Rising *fetishistically portrays motorbikes and their leather-clad riders*



Above: avant-garde musician Tony Conrad shooting The Flicker *with the assistance of Beverly Grant. Above right: Stephen Dwoskin's* Alone *(1964) concerned a favourite theme of his early films, the individual's relation or lack of relation to others, portrayed through women. Below: a child's cry is depicted by the emergence through its torn face of a tiny crying child in Stan Brakhage's* Dog Star Man



Harrington's filmic drama poems.

These attempts, small as they might seem, laid the groundwork for the most important initiative for the presentation and distribution of independently made films, the formation of the New York Film-Makers Cooperative. This cooperative was the gathering together of many film-makers, not only for film production but also to handle the exhibition of their work. For its time, the unity and the collective policy of the New York cooperative were unique, for it not only challenged the censorship laws but also introduced a policy allowing all films, of any content or style to be supported, screened and distributed without bias. There was no preselection policy and the organizational matters and labour were handled by film-makers themselves.

Its moving spirit, Jonas Mekas, was a poet, writer and film-maker. His own films were in a free diary-like style: *Circus Notebook* (1966) or *Reminiscences From a Journey to Lithuania* (1972). Mekas also wrote for the widely read and influential newspaper *The Village Voice* and his weekly column, reviewing the new independent films, drew considerable attention to the new film movement. Along with his brother Adolfas, also a film-maker, Jonas Mekas founded in 1955 the first serious magazine to deal with all aspects of cinema, *Film Culture*.

By the Sixties, the break from conventional Hollywood film became clearer. The battle had begun when the Underground films began to be shown by the New York Film-Makers Cooperative. One of the most memorable film screenings was the first showing of Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963), a glorious film of fantasy in a dream-like transvestite orgy, in a warehouse in downtown Manhattan. *Flaming Creatures* became so notorious that the United States Customs and the New York police destroyed any prints they could find. Years later it was the same film, brought before the United States Supreme Court, that finally led to the abolition of censorship.

Most of these Underground films were made without any assistance from grants or large public funding bodies. Personal expression was allowed in painting and poetry, but in terms of film it was highly criticized as not being properly film at all, much less serious cinematic expression. On another level, film was considered a mass medium used for communication, entertainment and propaganda, and was predominantly used as such. The notion of film in the hands of individuals or political groups presented a threat to the control of any establishment in society.

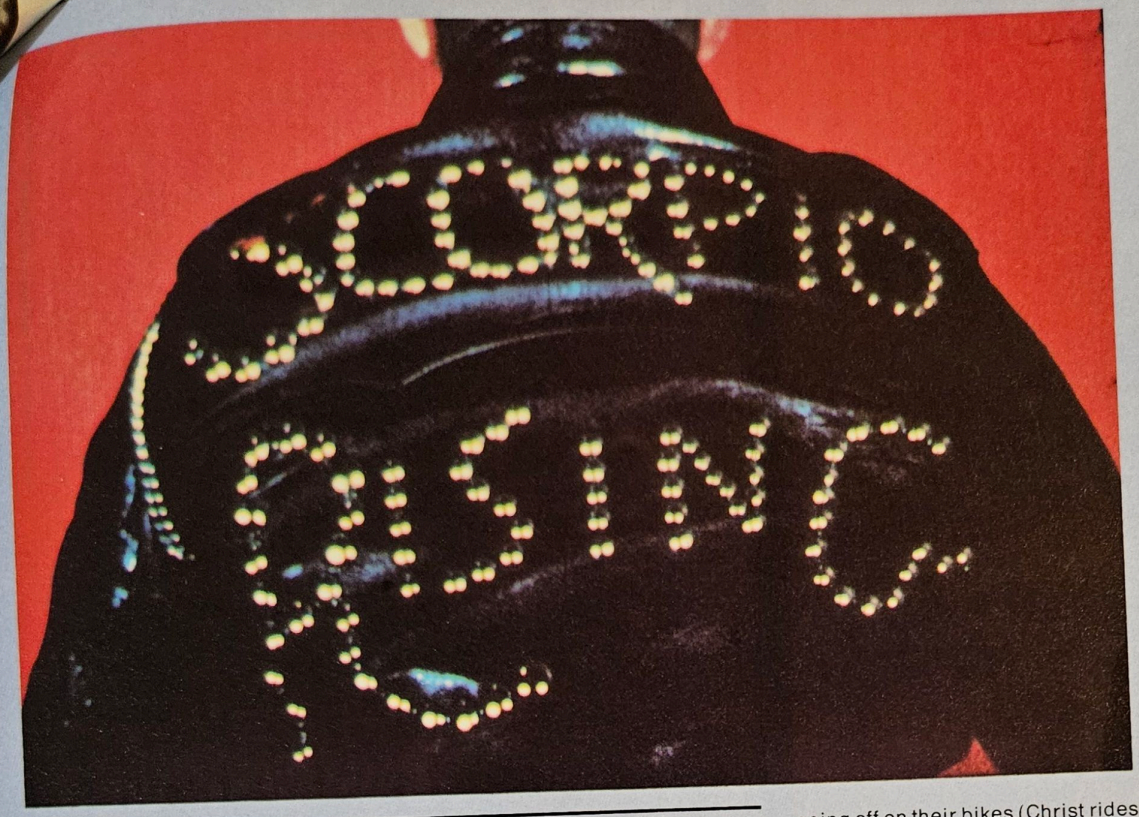
Kenneth Anger's films inhabited the same arena of homosexual concerns and the frustrations of a suppressed group as *Flaming Creatures*. In his first film *Fireworks* (1947) and later in *Scorpio Rising* (1963), Anger brilliantly and freely portrayed the rituals and dilemmas of the male homosexual. Jean Genêt, the French novelist, made *Un Chant d'Amour* (1950, A Song of Love) in which, as in Jean Cocteau's *Le Sang d'un Poète* (1930, *The Blood of a Poet*) and *Le Testament d'Orphée* (1959, *Testament of Orpheus*), the personal concerns of sexual self-expression produced strong films as well. Genêt's film, like *Flaming Creatures* but even more explicit, was raided and prints burned for years in a continuing witch hunt.

Kenneth Anger combined his personal world with a deep interest in what he called 'Magick' and its rituals and was very influenced by the writings of the English magician Aleister Crowley. His films *Kustom Kar Kommandos* (1965) and *Invocation of My Demon Brother* (1969) are superb examples. So is the more ambitious *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, describing a wild party that is also a quasi-religious rite and made in three different versions between 1954 and 1966.

Underground films exploited the properties of the film medium as well as improprieties of conduct

The films made moved across many terrains. More than thirty years after Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* attempted to express the role of a woman in society, Yvonne Rainer, another dancer, continued the theme in her *A Film About a Woman Who . . .* (1975). Another area seriously explored by film-makers was the formal notion of 'film as film', in which the film material itself or the physical presence of film and light became the subject. One example of this style is apparent even in the title of *Film in Which There Appear Edge Lettering, Dirt Particles, Sprocket Holes, Etc.* (1965). Almost every film-maker of this type thought of film as film stock, or as light, or as time, or as any combination, leaving no aspect untouched.

Tony Conrad's *The Flicker* (1966) simply consisted of clear and dark frames, arranged in patterns, causing the sensation of a changing but calculated strobe-effect. In a similar vein, in which the metric rhythm becomes an essential ingredient along with light and dark, is the Viennese Peter Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer* (1960), but instead of a strobing effect, a greater rhythmic beat is created. Kubelka pursued this metric effect mainly through



Directed by Kenneth Anger, 1963
Prod co: Puck Film Productions. **prod/sc/photo** (Ektachrome)/**ed/art dir:** Kenneth Anger. **songs sung by:** Little Peggy March, Elvis Presley, The Randells, The Angels, Bobby Vinton, Ray Charles, The Crystals, Kris Jensen, Claudine Clark, Gene McDaniels, The Surfaris. **r/t:** 31 minutes.
Cast: Bruce Byron (*Scorpio*), Johnny Sapienza (*Taurus*), Frank Carifi (*Leo*), Bill Dorfman (*The Back*), John Palone (*Pin*), Ernie Allo (*Joker*), Barry Rubin (*fall-guy*), Steve Crandell (*sissy cyclist*), Johnny Dodds (*Kid*).

Scorpio Rising is a film that is at once dense and immediate, a collage of complex images and overlapping structures which nonetheless make a direct and almost physical impact. It is witty, exhilarating, unpleasant, beautiful, intellectual, sexy . . . and impossible to pin down. The best way to approach it is to analyze its complex structure. But . . . a word of warning: the images are so brilliantly and quickly orchestrated in the film, so much happens virtually simultaneously, the visual and musical rhythms are so hypnotic, that no systematic reading can convey its dazzling effect.

The film is structured in several different ways, each superimposed on the others. Most obviously, the film is organized into a series of more or less self-contained sequences, each of which is precisely fitted to a late Fifties/early Sixties pop song. This series is also ordered in two overall ways: there is first a sort of narrative, though this is only loosely put together. Secondly, the narrative progression is also a ritual enactment, according to the precepts of what Kenneth Anger called 'Magick'.

Anger himself has suggested a division into four parts, which are also four ritual stages: 'Boys and Bolts', preparing for the ritual (assembling machines and getting dressed-up); 'Image Maker', getting physically prepared (freeing the mind with cocaine and 'getting high on heroes' such as Brando); 'Walpurgis Party', the frenzy out of which the ritual acts of Magick emerge (not only urinating on an altar, but also the use of a myriad of Magick talismen); and 'Rebel Rouser – The Gathering of the Dark Legions', ending in death. Finally, these song, narrative and ritual structures are criss-crossed by a number of strands of connected images, drawn most notably from Magick, hero-worship and homosexuality.

The strand of complex Magick imagery – such as a Grim Reaper skeleton, a scorpion preserved in glass, the number 777 – runs through the whole film, and each image weaves some esoteric spell or message. The hero-worship strand has three phases. First of all there are heroes drawn from the mass media, especially James Dean (seen in a pin-up in Scorpio's room) and Marlon Brando, but also the comic book Li'l Abner – a strong but simple fellow who, in the cartoon images shown, seems like a Huck Finn character – that is, another, though less violent, rejector of 'grown-up' society, complete with homo-erotic overtones.

The next hero is Christ. Scenes from a film supposedly called *The Road to Jerusalem* are cut into the boys going to the party (Christ walking with his disciples), the party itself (Christ looks off screen and the film cuts to a guy having mustard poured on him), and the boys going off on their bikes (Christ rides a donkey into Jerusalem). There is very precise intercutting here. The 'Gentle Jesus'-style Christ of the film touches the blind man's eye, and the film cuts to a man putting a parking ticket on a bike (an image of law and order); the now sighted blind man kneels before Christ, and there is a cut to a close-up of a penis sticking out of a fly. The use of such a milk-and-water image of Christ and these impudent cross-cuttings suggests an anti-Christian message, and that would be appropriate insofar as the film as ritual in part celebrates the new Aquarian age. In Aleister Crowley's Magick philosophy, this displaces the Piscean age of stoicism, self-denial and rigid order of which Christ was the prime embodiment. At the same time – as the accompanying songs make clear – the film does also recognize Christ as a 'Rebel Rouser'.

As the film reaches its climax, a sense of the unleashing of wild forces is conveyed by two more heroes – Adolf Hitler and Puck from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Hitler is shown in still images, while Puck is shown in a clip from Mickey Rooney's 1935 screen portrayal, urging on events with abandoned glee. All these heroes are enemies of stability: Christ and Hitler in angelic and demonic form, Brando and Puck in social and supernatural form.

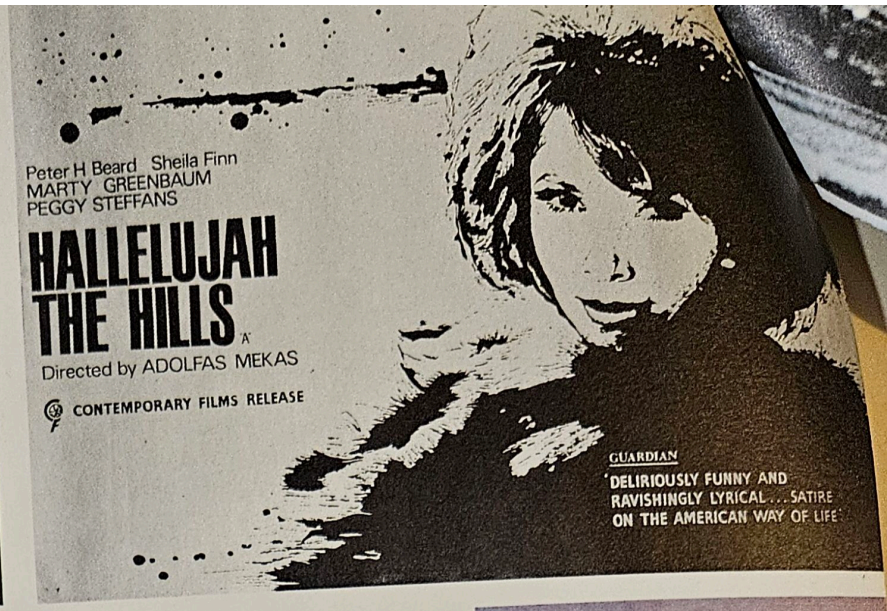
What such heroes stand for collectively is a powerful brew of all the forces of disruption.

The homosexual thread consists above all in the insistently erotic way in which the boys are shown, but also in cutting that suggests kissing and fellatio between characters. Anger has said, 'I guess my whole trip is phallic worship', and although the film is only mildly pornographic, it celebrates masculine sex-appeal in terms that are ultimately reducible to ideas of the mythical potency of the phallus – the use of fetish fabrics and objects, the love of symbols of power (bikes, Hitler), the caressing photography of huge back muscles, taughtened abdomens and hard flesh.

All these images and the structures through which they are shot interfuse in an ecstasy of forbidden and dangerous experience . . . but it is worth mentioning the wit with which this is done. The relations between the songs and the images indicate this most obviously: 'Wind Me Up' to images of putting bikes together and a boy playing with a toy bike; 'My Boyfriend's Back' to shots of both a skull and a completed bike; 'Blue Velvet' to dressing in leather and chains; and so on. There is wit even before the film starts – it is produced by 'Puck Productions', complete with the legend 'What fools these mortals be'. Puck represents mischief, and this is perhaps the heart of the film. Even the Magick, the heroes and the homosexuality are not taken quite straight, but with a literally wicked giggle. *Scorpio Rising* is a deeply *naughty* movie, and the most consummate expression of naughtiness imaginable.

RICHARD DYER

The bike boys polish and put their machines together overlooked by a skull (1, 2), and get dressed-up in leather and denim gear (3, 4). In his room, Scorpio reads a comic (5) and sniffs cocaine (6), while Marlon Brando's *The Wild One* plays on TV. He and the other boys leave their rooms, (intercut with an old film of the life of Christ). They arrive at a party (7) where, amidst much homosexual horseplay and flaunting of Nazi regalia (8), one boy gets mustard poured on him. Scorpio leaps onto a church altar with a Nazi flag draped over it, urinates into his crash helmet and makes an offering of it. The boys go out on their bikes and ride around. Finally one of them crashes and dies (9).



the editing process – Conrad did it through the camera process – and this rhythmic editing is best exemplified in *Unsere Afrikareise* (1966, Our Trip to Africa) which uses images rather than pure black-and-white frames. Another scrutiny of the filmic material can be found in *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969) by Ken Jacobs, in which an old short film based on the nursery rhyme, made by D. W. Griffith's cameraman Billy Bitzer in 1905, was subjected to a process of reframing, slowing down and other effects, to make up a whole new film in which every primary element of the cinema is explored.

Structuralism was a movement in French thought that emphasized the structure of relationships between parts rather than the parts themselves. *Wavelength* (1967), made by the Canadian Michael Snow, was unquestionably most influential in establishing the notion of structuralism in film. The film had the power to embrace filmic time, movement, colour and sound into a single unit, and those same elements were the content of the film itself. Snow, being both a sculptor and a musician, was able to bring into film in a pure state the ingredients of these other arts. Snow continued to explore these concepts in his films ⟷ (1969, also known as *Back and Forth*) and *La Région Centrale* (1971, The Central Region), shot on a mountain in Quebec. *Wavelength*, however, remained the most influential; viewers attributed to the film the notion of 'real time' (the length of time a film takes to view being equal to the time in which it was shot) because the film appeared to be a continuous zoom through a large room when, in fact, it was not continuous and often the 'real time' was broken.

It was the painter Andy Warhol who actually used 'real time'. This is best seen in *Empire* (1965), eight hours from dusk to dawn of the Empire State Building in New York. Warhol also made films which played off Hollywood stories, as in the Western parody *Lonesome Cowboys* (1968); or reading of scripts as in *Kitchen* (1965); or a take-off of multi-screen epics as in *The Chelsea Girls* (1966), set in New York's Chelsea Hotel and intended for showing on two screens simultaneously. This pop-art aspect, involving a love-hate relationship with the commercial Hollywood film, has been apparent throughout the Underground movement from the beginning.

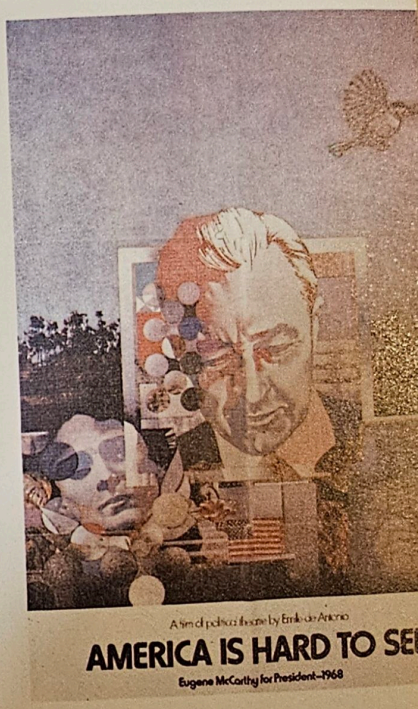
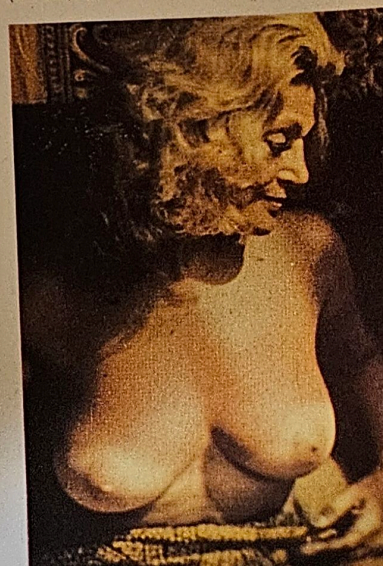
Pull My Daisy (1959) might be called the first Underground film. This came from the 'Beat' generation of artists, with script and voice-over by the novelist Jack Kerouac and with Allen Ginsberg playing the Poet; the film was made by Robert Frank and the painter Alfred Leslie. Ron Rice's films brought together the parody and fantasy elements in *The Flower Thief* (1960), *Senseless* (1962), *Chumlum* (1963). The Kuchar brothers made films which were like Bronx backyard versions on minimal budgets of Hollywood pseudo-dramas, using such titles as *Hold Me While I'm Naked* (1966) and *Eclipse of the Sun Virgin* (1967).

In this era, the most important aspect of all was the freedom and independence of personal choice and individual imagery, the enormous output and wide-ranging attitudes. There was animation done by such people as Stan VanDerBeek or the lifelong work of Harry Smith's epic and magical animation *Heaven and Earth Magic* (1962, released 1965 as *No 12*) and the enormous output of Robert Breer. There were continuous developments in computerized film imagery in, for example, the works of the Whitney brothers, such as *Lapis* (1966), which contributed subtle kinetic imagery to the later development of video.

On the other end of the scale was 'free documentary' from such groups as 'Newsreel' as well as more specifically political films by Emile De Antonio, including *In the Year of the Pig* (1969), concerning the Vietnam War. The collage films of Bruce Conner not unly utilized collage and 'found footage', material previously shot by other people for other purposes, but they were looped and structurally put together in such a way as to make a statement: for instance, *A Movie* (1958) and *A Report* (1965) comment on the commercial dramatization of news events. Social issues were also explored by Shirley Clarke in *The Cool World* (1963), about young blacks in Harlem, and in *Portrait of Jason* (1967), an interview with a male prostitute. John Cassavetes independently pursued social issues as well as using improvisation and an imitation of the *cinéma-vérité* style, simultaneously with the French *nouvelle vague*, in *Shadows* (1960), dealing with the relationships between the members of a black family in New York.

In the field of personal and poetic expression many worked and explored areas: the diary films of Mekas, the freedom of sexuality in the work of Jack Smith, the poetics of Bruce Baillie, emphasizing the effect of physical sensation, and of the most prolific film-maker in this area, Stan Brakhage. Brakhage's work, made over many years, includes *Dog Star Man* (1964), in which a man chopping down a tree is haunted by visions of his own past, *The Art of Vision* (1965) and a series called *Songs* (completed in 1969) as well as a relentless array of other films dealing with his own life, the world of nature, birth and death, and with the very nature of film and seeing.

STEPHEN DWOSKIN



Top left: Permutations *(1967), John Whitney's abstract animation. Top right: Adolfas Mekas' 1963 film was widely shown. Above: Emile De Antonio's film (1969) showed McCarthy's presidential hopes in 1968. Below: Sylvia Miles in a film about Hollywood, Paul Morrissey's* Heat *(1972), from Warhol's Factory*